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ABSTRACT

America is rapidly becoming an aging society. This phenomenon is supported by statistics and fueled by socioeconomic developments, medical advances, and the probability of continued lower fertility. Seven themes provide some solutions for the successful process of aging: (1) "Vital Involvement" stresses interactions that are important to the constant development of the self, relatives, and neighbors; promotes the establishment and maintenance of mutual relationships with people of all generations; and emphasizes programs that maximize optimistic, life-affirming beliefs and actions for counterbalancing thoughts about dying and about feeling ill and depressed; (2) "Continuous Enthusiasm for Life" confirms that the rate of aging can be controlled by various modern advances, discoveries, and individuals' own efforts, making adjustments in the way they live; (3) "Positive Perspective for the Aging Process" can be achieved by being realistic, having religious faith, pursuing a calling (purpose), and using role models; (4) "Positive Images of an Aging Society" emphasizes the characteristics of vibrant health, financial security, and active participation in the lives of families, communities, and politics; (5) "Positive Characteristics of the Aged" counterbalances the negative stereotypes of this group in the categories of the mental, physical, and socioeconomic; (6) "Social Facts about the Aged" represents accurate, positive data in the categories of mental, socioeconomic, intergenerational, and involvement; and (7) "The Significance of Retirement" reinforces the principle of lifelong learning. (A brief bibliography is included in this paper.) (Author/KC)

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SOME SOLUTIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL AGING

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Abstract

America is rapidly becoming an aging society. This phenomenon is supported by facts, statistics, and the results of socioeconomic developments, medical advances, and the probability of continued lower fertility. Seven themes provide some solutions for the successful process of aging. Vital Involvement stresses interactions that are important to the constant development of the self, relatives, and neighbors; promotes the establishment and maintenance of mutual relationships with people of all generations; emphasizes programs that maximize optimistic, life-affirming beliefs and actions for counterbalancing thoughts about dying and about feeling ill and depressed. Continuous Enthusiasm for Life confirms that the rate of aging can be controlled by various modern advances, discoveries, and our own efforts, making adjustments in the way we live. A Positive Perspective for the Aging Process can be achieved by being realistic, having religious faith, pursuing a calling (purpose), and using role models. Positive Images of an Aging Society emphasize the characteristics of vibrant health, financial security, and active participation in the lives of families, communities, and politics. Positive Characteristics of the Aged counterbalance the negative stereotypes of this group in the categories of the mental, physical, and socioeconomic. Social Facts about the Aged represent accurate, positive data in the categories of mental, socioeconomic, intergenerational, and involvement. The Significance of Retirement reinforces the principle of lifelong learning. (A Bibliography consists of eight references.)

SOME SOLUTIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL AGING

By 2000, 30 percent of the population will be over 65 years of age. According to the U.S. Census, 77 percent of the babies born in 1980 will live to be 65 years old. Statisticians, in a recent Metropolitan Life Insurance Company report, predict that babies born in 1986 will have a life expectancy of 75. Supportive of that report, another prediction indicates that by 2050 there will be a population with a life expectancy of 100. So clearly, America is becoming increasingly an aging society.

A major need is developing for this graying group: To promote a continuous successful process of aging. Some solutions for this need are provided in the seven themes of Vital Involvement, Continuous Enthusiasm for Life, Positive Perspective for the Aging Process, Positive Images of an Aging Society, Positive Characteristics of the Aged, Social Facts about the Aged, and The Significance of Retirement. Varied forms of repetition in content will occur from theme to theme, because emphasis is geared towards a realistic, positive presentation and reinforcement of the importance of this particular life stage.

Vital Involvement

Vital involvement should be envisioned, anticipated, planned, and continued for our later years. It is participation in interactions that are important to the constant development of the self, relatives, and neighbors. It is a way of establishing and maintaining mutual relationships with people of all generations and a way of preventing the old age experiences of extreme isolation. It will lead to heightened awarenesses and more optimistic, life-affirming beliefs and actions which will counterbalance thinking about dying and about feeling ill and depressed.

The life cycle, or the eight psychosocial stages, also prepare us for continuous vital involvement: infancy, early childhood, play age, adolescence, young adulthood, adult, and old age. These stages produce the adaptive strengths of hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom.

Components of vital involvement are realistic acknowledgments, exercise, volunteering, lifelong learning, the arts, and grandparenting. Through realistic acknowledgments, we are able to accept the truth about death, adapt to possible limitations as a result of a disability and adjust to the obvious aging symptoms of deterioration. In other instances, older bodies can be

revitalized through appropriate exercise that will help daily movements and activities to become a pleasure instead of a chore. Volunteering also provides another source of revitalization and satisfaction for the human psyche: To be needed.

Lifelong learning, the arts, and grandparenting are the major sources for intergenerational experiences. Because elders bring enthusiasm and interesting perspectives into higher education classrooms, both the old and young profit. In addition, the arts, with the presence of young people, become an avenue to exhilaration, providing little time for older persons to participate in self-pity and to discuss ailments.

The grandparenting process is significant for three reasons. It is a source for preparing younger people for old age, positive interactions, and guides for the elderly. Through relationships with grandparents, children are instilled with positive images of the aging process. Equally important, grandparenting can be considered as the major form of vital involvement that consistently makes life meaningful in thought and participation in the interactions with adult children and grandchildren. In addition to parents and contemporary elders, grandparents become the role models for older people. Striving to emulate their

grandparents, older people become strong in counterbalancing the later years' uncertainties about how to behave in the present, value the past and prepare for the future.

Continuous Enthusiasm for Life

There are three major realities for the aging process. First, genes do determine our life span. Second, we may not escape all diseases and disabilities, for cancer may develop in our later years despite taking good care of ourselves. Third, the rate of aging can be controlled through various modern advances, discoveries, and our own efforts. Those advances will help us to have a longer life--medical technology, preventive medicine, exercise on a regular basis, improved sanitation, and nutrition. By making adjustments in the way we live, our efforts can enhance those modern achievements. As a consequence, we will increase our chances for a happy, healthy life in the later years, for aging does not have to lead to mental and physical incompetence.

There are seven major life adjustments for controlling the rate of aging. They are preparation for a longer life, reference to role models, eating in moderation, polishing our positive attitudes, using strategies for mental alertness, and coping with stress.

With the exception of aging, we make plans for most of our daily activities. Yet in the later years, the usually happy

people are those who prepared. Younger people in their 40s and 50s also emphasize this wisdom. Consideration is given to proper exercise, diet, and health. Out of fear of developing a rut lifestyle, they are changing their careers in mid-life. Just as important, to reduce stress, they are moving to serene, small cities and rural towns.

The significance of role models can not be underestimated, for such a factor provides a major impetus for the aging process. Historical and contemporary models demonstrate that age is not an obstacle to performance and achievement. In addition, the longest living man, a Japanese of 119 years, provided two ways of having a long life: Do not worry and have faith in God, Sun, and Buddha.

The longest living people also do not consume a lot of food. They eat in moderation; they do not overeat.

Attitude, as with eating modification, is another major contributor to enthusiasm and successful aging. The continuous polishing of positive attitudes enable some elders to remain active through a gradual adjustment to the physical and mental changes of aging. These people merely ignore gray hair and the other non-incapacitating characteristics.

Wisdom and basic intelligence increase with age. Crystallized intelligence, synonymous with wisdom, is

demonstrated by the mind's ability to use a lifetime of learning. Thinking through our problems is basic intelligence.

Four major steps will help us to continue to use both kinds of intelligence.

- 1) Remain socially involved; maintain interest beyond job; Do not isolate self.
- 2) Continue to stimulate mind; remain involved in lifelong learning; stimulating activities range from reading, college instruction to self-instruction.
- 3) Exercise regularly; it calms and strengthens mind and body.
- 4) Try to always be flexible; participate in new, learning experiences; adapt to unfamiliar situations; interact with new people, including a diversity of constructive lifestyles.

Stress, the prime cause of aging, can shorten our life span. Stress is also an asset, for it can enable us to confront reality and problems, learn, compete, and excel.

There are six strategies for successfully coping with stress.

- 1) Try to live and work in an environment that provides more control for what you do. A job that does not provide for degrees of independence and innovation will become a form of long-term stress.

- 2) Avoid being hostile. It may produce two sources of stress--loneliness and guilt.
- 3) Have a commitment to important values. It makes life more satisfying and meaningful.
- 4) Welcome the challenge of change. See it not as a source for frustration.
- 5) Exercise. Examples of daily 20-minute aerobic exercises are walking and running in place, jumping rope, stationary cycling, brisk walking, jogging, bicycling, swimming, and aerobic dancing. All of these activities and other selections will help you to desensitize, keep stress contained.
- 6) Practice relaxation. An example of enforced relaxation is the technique of breaking 15 to 20 minutes from the strife of work or family. Try to close eyes and see nothing. This technique will refresh and make you more alert.

Positive Perspective for the Aging Process

A positive perspective for the aging process can be attained by being realistic, having faith in God, pursuing a calling (purpose), and using role models. These are also four ways for renewing and enhancing hope and for coping positively with the aging process.

Consideration must be made for two realistic characteristics of the aging process--physical changes and death. Certain body reductions occur. Because there is a decline in adrenal activity, the capacity for coping with stress is reduced. Senses decline, especially taste. Body organs loose weight: There is reduction in brain cells and muscle fiber.

We deal with death through control of our attitude, the last freedom that can not be taken away from us. With a realistic and positive attitude, death and the aging process can be perceived as passages. In the aging process, this passage can symbolize a rich experience of life that will enhance our wisdom.

Having faith in God strengthens us to engage in six major activities that help us to have a successful aging process.

- 1) Emphasize the future, God, and his provisions.
- 2) Transcend ageism, discrimination against the elderly by failing to recognize differences, depending on generalities, and de-emphasizing individuality.
- 3) Achieve inner security and sense of direction.
- 4) Embrace the religious approach to death, an ending and a transitional passage.
- 5) Reduce stress by coping with the anxiety of death.

- 6) Become aware of the presence of the inner spirit which counteracts loneliness and other losses.

Having faith in God will also encourage us to improve our lives through the continuation or selection of a purpose, a reason for living. Notably, this calling, or purpose, does not end with old age, but can continue to be a focal point, even if some adaptations have to be made. It is through living with a purpose that good stresses are produced--peace, enthusiasm, and joy. These good stresses inhibit or eliminate the bad stresses of depression, anxiety, and resentment.

Through inspiring us to sustain our faith in God to the end, role models also help us to successfully grow old. They provide examples of the significance of cheerfulness, good nutrition, adequate exercise, rest, keeping an active mind and body, being financially organized in case of an emergency, having a clean and comfortable home that is enjoyable for self and friends, helping others, engaging in lifelong learning, and most important, maintaining faith in God.

Positive Images of an Aging Society

Further increases in life expectancy are anticipated as a result of socioeconomic developments, medical advances, and the probability of continued lower fertility. Consequently, the meaning or significance of given ages is changing. Large numbers of men and women over 65 are healthy, energetic,

mentally agile, and quite young in behavior and lifestyles. A very large group of retirees and their spouses also share these characteristics: vibrant health, relatively financially secure, and active participants in the lives of their families, communities, and politics.

Appreciable numbers of these older people are also highly involved in the process of lifelong learning. For this group, the most effective educational programs are those designed for special interests; yet, these older learners enroll in a wide range of courses, from the arts, physical health to personal growth. They are generally not interested in credentials, degrees, tests, grades, and competition. In addition, their major preference is for participator learning, which permits active involvement as opposed to the typical lecture format.

Positive Characteristics of the Aged

Only the positive and diverse characteristics of older Americans are presented in order to counterbalance, in part, the negative stereotypes of this group. Three categories are included: mental, physical, and socioeconomic.

Mental

The majority of older persons--

- 1) Can learn new things equally as well as younger individuals, when given adequate time and repetition of material.

- 2) Have good health and are not senile.
- 3) Are flexible, welcome change and are not set in their ways.
- 4) Are just as effective as young workers.
- 5) Are easy to get along with, seldom irritated or angry.
- 6) Are usually happy or satisfied.

Physical

The majority of older persons have--

- 1) A small percentage of acute illnesses and injuries in the home as compared to younger people.
- 2) A small percentage of auto accidents (over 65) per person as compared to drivers under 65.
- 3) Enough good health to perform their usual, daily activities--about 80 percent of this population.

Socioeconomic

The majority of older persons--

- 1) Do not have incomes below the official poverty line, only 1 percent, as compared to the rest of the population.
- 2) Receive their proportionate share of the nation's revenues.
- 3) Are employed, more than 75 percent, or would like to be employed.
- 5) Continue to be actively involved in volunteer organizations.

- 6) Seldom violate the law.
- 7) Continue to maintain interest and have capacity for sexual relations past 65.
- 8) Will have a higher healthy socioeconomic status in the year 2000.

Social Facts about the Aged

Social facts about the aged are presented in four categories: mental, socioeconomic, intergenerational, and involvement.

Mental

- 1) The ability to solve problems does not decline significantly during the aging process.
- 2) Highly creative work is possible for the later years, if an appropriate environment and personal motivation are provided.
- 3) Most older people do not have negative self-images.
- 4) Most men and women experience little stress in adapting to retirement and its new social status and lifestyle.
- 5) If a high level of motivation is present, there will be relatively little decline in work productivity with age.
- 6) Emphasizing experiences and coping strategies will compensate for any decline in cognitive and physical skills.

Socioeconomic

- 1) The majority of older Americans live in an urban environment.
- 2) A high proportion of elders age in place and reside in small towns, while young people migrate to large cities.
- 3) The two major crimes against the elderly are purse snatching and home burglaries; however, they are victimized less than other age groups.
- 4) The majority of older people prefer an independent residence.
- 5) The majority of elders own their homes.
- 6) The stress of institutionalization can be reduced by helping the elder to prepare for the move, find a similar or higher-quality environment, and maintain contact with the family and community.

Intergenerational

- 1) Most over age 65 parents live near at least one adult child, about a one-hour drive.
- 2) Mothers and daughters, as compared to sons and parents, tend to have stronger frequent and quality interactions.
- 3) Sons are more than likely to provide financial assistance, than care, to older parents.

- 4) Because of intereactions with grandparents, children tend to have positive attitudes about the elderly and about growing old.

Involvement

- 1) The most frequent leisure activities for those over age 65 are home-based, indoors and solitary--especially for the oldest retired segments--socializing with relatives and friends, TV viewing, gardening, reading, sitting, and thinking.
- 2) The majority of elders do not belong to senior citizens organizations. The members are mainly women with good health and transportation; joiners throughout life; with lower to middle-class status; strongly attached to the neighborhood or community.
- 3) Many older people are political officials.
- 4) The number of religious elders may decline in church attendance; however, they may continue to read or watch religious services on TV or radio.
- 5) A larger percentage of the pre- and postretirement older people are taking courses in credit and noncredit educational programs.

The Significance of Retirement

Retirement should not be a period of inactivity, but a time for learning, involvement, and satisfaction. In short, we continue to grow, be enriched, and not become old.

Retirement should not begin with retirement. Plans should be made earlier. We begin with retirement and doing all of those things we dream of doing later. This is also relaxation, doing and imaginatively doing those things we like to do. It can be achieved, without straining, by thinking, daydreaming, for 10 minutes about our valued causes and activities. The result will be satisfaction, for these brief moments of imaginative relaxation can be integrated into our work to make it more interesting. During this process we are also using a constructive, mental form of play--another major ingredient of relaxation and practice for retirement.

Then in retirement we continue the process of lifelong learning and commitment to causes and other activities that promote increased growth, happiness, and good health. We get to know more about ourselves and our feelings, continuing to learn that there is always room for improvement. This attitude helps us to adjust happily to retirement and the later years.

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